

Michael Kirby



Justice

High Court of Australia

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Please describe your job role for our readers.

I am one of the seven Justices of the High Court of Australia. That is Australia's Constitutional Court, created by the Constitution as the "Federal Supreme Court" of the nation. It is also the ultimate appellate court for appeals from all courts, federal, State and Territory throughout Australia.

Student often go through a lot of thought before deciding on their definite career path, what made you decide you wanted to pursue the career in your field?

It was, in part, a process of elimination and, in part, a matter of skills. At school I was very good in history and English literature, debating, plays and so on. So I inclined to a profession where those skills, that seems to come naturally to me, would be maximised. As well, I could not stand the thought of cutting up rats, still less humans. So I gravitated to law - a clean type of business (I thought).

Can you name 3 key qualities or things that have been essential in the rise to your current position?

Intelligence and intellectual ability; persistence, hard work and perseverance in the face of adversity; inner calm. The last has a lot to do with whether you are lucky in your home life. I have a loving and supporting family as a child and a partner, Johan, who has given me support and appropriate criticism (as well as love) over 33 years. Please keep in mind that professional success is very important in life. But getting the right life's companion is even more important, in terms of the big picture. Also being lucky with your staff is critical to success. In my life I have had five secretaries, all outstanding. Janet Saleh, my current PA, carries a tremendous share of my workload. So do my Associates, young law graduates chosen on equal opportunity lines. Without a working team with whom there is mutual respect, most people in top jobs would be nothing.

How much would you attribute to luck for being in your current position? Have there been any decisions which have turned out to be turning points in your career?

Luck is inescapably important in work and life. What if I had not been absent from Law II class in 1960 on the day Murray Gleeson nominated me to be the student representative on the Student Law society? If I had been there, I would probably have modestly declined. But I was not there, I was elected and set in train a "juggernaut of student politics". This got me noticed by many people who later advanced my legal and international career. What if I had not gone to the gay venue on 11 February 1969, I would not have met my partner Johan. So don't ever tell me that life is inevitable. It depends on chance - and then seizing and making the most of chances. Carpe diem.

What has been your greatest challenge in your career? How did you overcome it?

The challenges come every day. Discipline, determination and a desire to show critics that they have misjudged you can be a big factor. In 1984 I was appointed President of the New South Wales Court of Appeal. This was a very demanding and prestigious judicial post. There were many critics of my appointment. I was determined to succeed. I believe that, by sheer hard work and cooperation from my colleagues who also wanted the institution to succeed, I did so. Also I killed my critics with kindness. I always do. It is part of my upbringing. And it is not only a moral path but usually a good strategy in life. Kill enemies with kindness. It is a very confusing tactic.

Where do you draw your inspiration from? What keeps you going when everything seems to be falling apart?

From my parents, my siblings and family, my partner and my education and religious upbringing. I do not mean to pretend to be a very religious person. But I did absorb the message of love and reconciliation that I learned in my upbringing in an Anglican Christian home. I am sure that all the Churches and all religions have this message of love at the core of their teaching. Sadly, some religious leaders (mostly old men) forget the core beliefs on the way. I have always considered that love for fellow human beings is the fundamental source of universal human rights. (The same goes for love of sentient animals). We can identify with other living creatures because they share with us the mystery of life and consciousness.

What have been the personal and other costs in rising to your position? And has it been worth it?

The personal costs have been the making of enemies and the loss of time with the people who really matter just because the work has to be done. Australians seem to specialise in cutting down tall poppies. If you have been in high public positions for as long as I have (since 1974) you tend to attract enemies and critics. I have had a recent and very public experience of this phenomenon. However, it is vital to keep above the fray and to remain focussed and disciplined. Hate is very destructive of human energy. My sexuality has, I believe, created hate in some uninformed and ignorant people. I try to understand and respond positively to them. Certainly, I never hate them. In fact, in all my life I cannot think of a single person I have ever hated. My partner Johan thinks my religious beliefs are sheer superstition and that I am a bit naive about people. But we are all the product of our upbringing and experience. You just go on being you. I just go on being me.

What tips can you give fresh graduates to survive politics in the workplace?

Success is in the eye of the beholder and in the life of the individual. Being kind to others, not totally self-absorbed but also disciplined and hard working is a good start for work success. Keeping one's sense of proportion about "success" is also vital. After all, in the eye of eternity and in the mighty universe, being a Justice of the High Court of Australia is no big deal.

How important are mentors and networking in building a successful career? What tips can you give to be an effective network?

Mentors are vital. And being willing to be a mentor is also important. It is impossible to build up a network of friends and supporters if you are only interested in yourself. Lasting success in networking only comes to those who are genuinely interested in and willing to contribute to the lives of others. One advances one's own career incidentally to doing things for others. Then others remember and, at critical moments, comes payback time. People are not stupid. They soon tell the doers and the willing horses from the moaners and groaners and negative types. Think positively. There is a lot to be said for the power of positive thinking and positive action.

Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years time?

Who knows? Under the Constitution I have seven more years to serve as a Justice of the High Court before my retirement. Perhaps I will be given a chance of service in an international body. In my career, I have tended to move on after a decade in one place. I have been a Justice of the High Court for the past seven years. But when you get to my age, you do not invest so much in long playing records. Time is running out and there are still so many interesting things to do. Combating ignorance and discrimination against women, Aborigines, people of different races, homosexuals and others for starters. Keep optimistic. Keep idealistic. I have all my life - and that is now a very long time.